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ABSTRACT

Functionally illiterate adults differ in several ways from children in a learning setting: they have a broader range of experience, they are more rigid and resistant to change, they know what they want from education, they are free to drop out at any time, they may have a long history of failure, they want to see immediate and visible progress, they may become easily discouraged, and their attempts to learn may be hampered by family or financial problems. The most important factors in literacy education are the teacher and the extent to which that teacher is able to build four components into the program: love, student self-worth, fun, and student participation in making meaningful decisions. Most dropouts occur because of poor teachers, the course content, or the scheduling and location of instruction. (TJ)

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Working with the Functionally Illiterate Adult

Nancy E. Grawe

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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Suprising as it may seem in our land of plenty, a three year study conducted at the University of Texas determined that slightly over half (53.6%) of our population can be termed "functionally illiterate". This means that their reading skills are so inadequate that they are unable to function in everyday situations such as reading directions, completing forms, reading street signs, newspaper ads, a driver's test, forms, etc.

In an effort to cope in an extremely complicated society, these people have developed a complex set of defense mechanisms to hide the disability. (And that is what is because in many ways, they are like blind people). Our local Michigan Employment Security Commission office reports that the illiterate will bring someone else along to assist in filling out the forms or will feign being in a hurry and take them home for someone else to fill out. In other cases, they pretend that they have forgotten their glasses and ask someone nearby for help. One Chevrolet foreman reported that he had a habit of reading the paper every morning to a group of his men. Later, he would find some of them quoting an article in the paper and pointing to it in the paper to prove a point. The only trouble was that they were often on the wrong page!

When these people finally muster enough courage to seek help, it is important that the people who are working with them understand the differences between adults and children in the learning setting. Let's take a look at some of the ways in which they differ:

1. They bring with them a broader range of experience to draw from and relate to which means they are able to gain insights and develop understanding of relationships not perceived by children.
2. They are more rigid and resistant to change.
3. They know what they want from education and are willing to work for it.
4. They are free to terminate at any time and many will.

5. They may have had a long history of failure in both learning and life and thus may fear making another attempt at learning.
6. They want to see immediate and visible progress, especially in the specific goal which they have set for getting this help.
7. May become easily discouraged after the original motivation that brought them has weakened.
8. Their attempts to learn may be hampered by family problems, financial stress, mob demands, etc.

I'm sure anyone who has worked with the older student could add to this list of characteristics and certainly no one student will fit the model perfectly just as there is truly no typical elementary child. However, these are the commonalitites which seem to appear with the most frequency and are shared for that reason.

Assuming that our functional illiterate has sought help, the next question to which we must address ourselves is "what turns him on and keeps his interest?". As in just about every area in education, the single most important factor is the teacher and to what extent he or she is able to build these four components into the program.

Love. This can be a nebulous term in a broad sense but in our frame of reference, we suggest that this means that the teacher will exhibit a high degree of caring for the individual. It suggests that the teacher is able to accept this person with his dirty hands or clothes, improper language, bad breath or whatever he brings with him. Since it may be harder to accept these qualities in another adult than in a young child who you might pity, it often takes an extra amount of understanding to work with them. Therefore, in selecting personnel to teach functionally illiterate adults, it is important to choose a person who is comfortable with himself and has love to share with his fellow man.

The next component is Self-worth. The student is not looking for pity or solicitude but rather for someone who has respect for him as a person. The same person who reads poorly or not at all already may have a low self-image and he desperately needs someone who can convey the feeling that he is a worthwhile human being, that he has something to contribute to our society. One of our teachers was able to develop this feeling in her student when she had her student teach her to crochet, a skill she had always wanted to master but hadn't been able to learn. The rapport that developed over this sharing set the stage for some meaningful learning. Another found that his student was an expert brick mason and was able to hire him for a job that had long been waiting for a capable person. The student must know that even though the levels of expertise may be different and in different areas, that he has a meaningful contribution to make to the whole scheme of things. It is also important to remember that the adult student can spot a fake right away so the teacher should be careful not to make false flattering statements just for the sake of making them.

Thirdly, the program must contain some fun. A good sense of humor and some experiences to laugh over set the stage for learning. Most of us can remember well the classes in which we had fun. A good joke or sharing a humorous experience with the student relaxes the tension and produces a friendly atmosphere. Particularly in night classes, the student may have had a rough day at work and a good laugh can help a lot. One of our ESL teachers has a habit of opening her class by asking if the students have come across any new words since the last class. One young woman asked what a "hucker" was. After some confused questioning back and forth, the teacher finally determined that the young woman had attempted to read "The Happy Hooker". There were many laughs all around as the teacher tried to find a way to explain the meaning of that one within the limited English ability of the students.

Making meaningful decision. The student has already made one meaningful decision in opting to receive help and he should be included in decisions regarding his course of study. The teacher has the responsibility to present to the student all the options that are available to him. Many of them will see this as a last ditch effort but if the teacher can create a feeling that this is not the end of the road, he will then become involved and receptive to the learning. This adult is making decisions of one kind or another every day of his life so why shouldn't he be involved in this important one.

In addition to these qualities, the teacher must have full command of his subject matter. Unlike the child in school who is "stuck" with a poor teacher these adults can spot a phony and walk away and many of them do. They are here to learn and they are looking for a teacher who knows what he is doing. In a recent panel discussion by adult students, the young and the old agreed without exception that the single ingredient that kept them coming was the expertise of the teacher.

It would be unrealistic to believe that even if all of these conditions exist, that there will be no dropouts. This is a continuing problem in all adult programs and one that is receiving a great deal of attention and study among educators in this field. In an effort to get some answers to this question, we asked our students to give us some feedback as to why people leave - what turns them off. Naturally, there were a variety of reasons but there were a few which came up with some consistency.

Just as a good teacher turns them on, probably the greatest turn off resulted from poor teachers. Our students included in the "poor teacher" category not only those who did not know their subject but also those who were unable to relate to the adult in a meaningful way. One student told of a teacher who constantly berated a student because he was always ten minutes late for class. They almost came to blows and eventually the student dropped out.

If the teacher would have investigated the situation, he would have discovered that the work schedule of this person made it impossible for him to be on time and that he was working under some hardships to even get there at all.

Probably the second most common cause of dropout was the content of the course of instruction. Teaching Hamlet to a student who has come to learn the words in the safety manual or how to pass his driver's test will certainly turn him off as fast as anything I can think of. Unlike the child put in the same situation, this student can walk away. Until fairly recently, the publishers had not done much in providing material for adult students that was relevant to their needs but I am happy to report that there is a whole raft of new material on the market which is intended for this purpose and luckily, some of the best around is not prohibitively expensive. We have prepared a list of the materials which are working for us and will provide you with a copy.

Another area which presents problems for the adult learner is the scheduling and location of instruction. Since work schedules are always changing, it may become necessary for the student to change his time of attendance and if there is no alternate time or place for him, he will give up. In order to meet this need, we are attempting to offer classes at many times during the day and evening and in many places.

In summary, we still have a lot to learn about the adult illiterate and his needs but I am happy to report that there are many interested educators around who are investigating this important aspect of education and its implications for life-long learning. We are looking for teachers who have those special qualities that are needed to work with the adult and finding ways to provide training for those who would like to enter this field.

We are listening to them to find out what turns them off and what we can do to keep them turned on. We are seeking methods and materials to provide the best possible instruction for them and we are finding them.

Most of all, we are showing a concern for the literacy problems in our country and that is the most hopeful sign of all. It is not enough to raise a person's standard of living if we do not also raise his level of literacy to the point that he may become a fully functioning, literate member of our great society!